Epitomes

Important Advances in Clinical Medicine

Dermatology

The Scientific Board of the California Medical Association presents the following inventory of items of progress in dermatology. Each item, in the judgment of a panel of knowledgeable physicians, has recently become reasonably firmly established, both as to scientific fact and important clinical significance. The items are presented in simple epitome and an authoritative reference, both to the item itself and to the subject as a whole, is generally given for those who may be unfamiliar with a particular item. The purpose is to assist busy practitioners, students, research workers or scholars to stay abreast of these items of progress in dermatology that have recently achieved a substantial degree of authoritative acceptance, whether in their own field of special interest or another.

The items of progress listed below were selected by the Advisory Panel to the Section on Dermatology of the California Medical Association and the summaries were prepared under its direction.

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Chloracne

CHLORACNE IS A DISORDER of sebaceous follicles characterized by the development of a profusion of open and closed comedones and small, straw-colored cysts. These lesions are heavily concentrated on the malar aspect of the face, the postauricular region, the axillae, the groin and the extremities. The finding of squamous metaplasia of sebaceous glands on histopathologic examination may aid in distinguishing this condition from other acneiform diseases.

Chloracne is caused by the ingestion, inhalation or transcutaneous penetration of certain halogenated aromatic hydrocarbons. The ability to cause chloracne appears to be highly correlated with the systemic toxicity of these compounds. For example, 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin is an extremely toxic molecule and is also a potent chloracnegen. In contrast, 1,2,3,4-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin, an isomer that differs only in the position of two chlorine atoms, lacks the ability to induce chloracne and is relatively nontoxic.

The evidence that the presence of chloracne is the single best and most sensitive indicator of exposure to certain halogenated aromatic hydrocarbons comes from the investigation of accidental human contamination. The chloracnegenic compounds are often unwanted by-products of the synthesis of such substances as herbicides (2,4,5-trichlorophenoxyacetic acid, a major component of herbicide Orange) and wood preservatives (pentachlorophenol), or they may directly contaminate foodstuffs (polyhalogenated biphenyls).

Chloracne will develop within three to four months in those persons exposed to a sufficient amount of a chloracnegenic chemical and generally will resolve within two years. Chloracne may persist after exposure to the inciting chemical possibly due to release of these substances from fat reservoirs. In rare cases the condition can continue for as long as 30 years.

In conclusion, the development of chloracne is the single most sensitive indicator of exposure to certain toxic polyhalogenated hydrocarbons. These substances appear to be inescapable by-products of modern industrialized society.

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Recessive X-Linked Ichthyosis

RECESSIVE X-LINKED ICHTHYOSIS, an uncommon but not rare disorder, was clearly delineated from other genetic forms of ichthyosis through careful clinical and genealogic studies almost two decades ago. This form of ichthyosis is characterized clinically by the onset shortly after birth of closely adherent dark brown scales that most severely involve extensor surfaces of the extremities but also encroach on flexures. The trunk is involved as is the neck flexure; face, scalp, palms and soles are usually spared. Characteristic but asymptomatic opacities are present in Descemet's membrane of the cornea.

Although the prenatal syndrome of placental steroid sulfatase deficiency, characterized by extremely low maternal urinary estrogen levels despite fetal well-being, was first described in 1969, a decade elapsed before it was recognized that deficiency of this enzyme postnatally resulted in recessive X-linked ichthyosis. It has now been confirmed worldwide

that the microsomal enzyme, steroid sulfatase, is deficient in all patients with recessive X-linked ichthyosis.

Diagnosis of this disorder may be established by several methods. Prenatally, it can be inferred from a characteristic profile of maternal estrogen excretion and confirmed through direct enzyme assay in cultured fetal amniocytes. Postnatally, steroid sulfatase activity can be assayed in cultured fibroblasts or fresh leukocytes. The diagnosis can also be inferred from the accumulation of cholesterol sulfate, a substrate of the enzyme, in scale from these patients and in serum and erythrocyte membranes. In serum, cholesterol sulfate is carried on predominantly low-density lipoproteins (LDL); in cases of recessive X-linked ichthyosis, accumulation of cholesterol sulfate in LDL results in increased electronegativity of these particles—hence their altered electrophoretic mobility on lipoprotein electrophoresis. Thus, a readily available standard laboratory test may be used for the diagnosis of this disorder.

Other forms of ichthyosis have also been linked to abnormalities in epidermal lipid metabolism. This association is not surprising in view of the structure of stratum corneum, in which anucleated, keratinized corneocytes are surrounded by an extracellular matrix composed of neutral lipids (especially alkanes, triglycerides, free fatty acids, cholesterol and ceramides). Alterations in the composition of the extracellular lipid matrix affect the normal process of desquamation. Cholesterol sulfate, a highly amphipathic lipid, is one of the few remaining polar lipids in stratum corneum. Its hydrolytic enzyme, steroid sulfatase, also localizes to the intercellular regions of stratum corneum. Continuing hydrolysis of cholesterol sulfate as corneocytes move outward may be a critical factor leading to normal desquamation. In the stratum corneum of patients with recessive X-linked ichthyosis, absence of steroid sulfatase activity results in continued high levels of cholesterol sulfate, reduced levels of free sterol and impaired desquamation.

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Subsets of Systemic Lupus Erythematosus

NEWLY DEFINED SUBSETS of lupus erythematosus are of value in defining prognosis and suggesting management approaches.

Subacute cutaneous lupus erythematosus is a cutaneous lupus variant characterized by mild systemic disease and slow therapeutic response. The lesions may be annular and polycyclic or papulosquamous and psoriasiform. Areas involved usually are the shoulders, upper chest and back. There is little scarring, photosensitivity is common and patients usually have mild systemic disease. Serologic markers of subacute cutaneous lupus include HLA-DR3 and the antibody anti-Ro (SSA [Sjögren's syndrome antibody]). In patients whose diagnosis is a problem, skin biopsy for hematoxylin-eosin stain and immunopathology should be done. In addition to the usual lupus serologic tests, studies for anti-Ro (SSA) antibody and HLA-DR3 may help to define the problem. It is important to differentiate the psoriasiform type from psoriasis, as therapy for psoriasis—that is, ultraviolet light—is contraindicated in patients with lupus.

Neonatal lupus erythematosus is a subset in which patients may or may not have cutaneous lesions. A "raccoon rash" is most common, though discoid and subacute cutaneous lupus lesions also occur. Mothers of these children may have clinical or serologic features of connective tissue disease. Systemic features of neonatal lupus include congenital heart block, hepatosplenomegaly and failure to thrive. Antinuclear antibodies are usually found, and the anti-Ro (SSA) antibody seems to be a marker in the patients and their mothers. The anti-Ro (SSA) antibody may be useful in prenatal screening of mothers with connective tissue disease and in identifying neonates at high risk for the development of congenital heart block.

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Leukotrienes—Their Importance in Dermatology

THE LEUKOTRIENES CONSTITUTE a group of derivatives of arachidonic acid that were so named because they were first isolated from preparations of leukocytes and were all found to possess three conjugated double bonds. Neutrophils, macrophages, eosinophils, basophils and some populations of mast cells are capable of generating leukotrienes. Leukotrienes C_4, D_4 and E_4 (abbreviated LTC_4, LTD_4 and LTE_4) are unique among the known metabolites of arachidonic acid—which include the prostaglandins and thromboxanes—in respectively having the tripeptide glutathione, the dipeptide cysteinyl-glycine and cysteine alone, linked to the arachidonic acid skeleton. LTC_4 and LTD_4 constitute the major part of the activity that was previously called slow-reacting substance of anaphylaxis. In the skin, these two compounds cause increased permeability of postcapillary venules. Most significant, LTC_4 and LTD_4 are at least 1,000-fold more potent on a molar basis than is histamine. When injected into human skin, LTC_4 and LTD_4 produce classic urticaria, suggesting that these agents may be involved in the production of some types of urticaria, especially those that are unresponsive to antihistamine therapy. Unlike the prostaglandins and thromboxanes, the generation of leukotrienes is not suppressed by most nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin, indomethacin or ibuprofen. However, corticosteroids do inhibit the generation of leukotrienes as well as the prostaglandins and thromboxanes.

Another leukotriene, designated LTB_4, which does not